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Get real on freeway, Ahwatukee, Stanton

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News reports in recent months might give the impression that all Ahwatukee Foothills residents are stridently opposed to the proposed South Mountain Freeway. That's not true, but those unopposed have been a quiet, if not silent, group, perhaps fearing the backlash of neighbors if they speak up.

At the latest meeting of the Ahwatukee Foothills Village Planning Committee, some members spoke up to suggest that it's time to get involved in design concepts with the Arizona Department of Transportation. If the freeway comes down Pecos Road, they say, it's better to have some input in what it looks like and in land use around it, than to just take whatever comes.

Planning committee members Van Braswell and Laurel Arndt, as well as Vice Chairman Mel Hannah, demonstrated good leadership in this aspect. While not throwing in the towel in regards to the freeway alignment, their willingness to come to the table with ADOT during the Environmental Impact Study shows they truly have the community's good in mind.

We are a little curious about Councilman Greg Stanton's public comment at a recent Town Hall in which he criticized ADOT for "being in a hurry to get this done." We like Stanton, but no one who has read a newspaper in the past 20 years would accuse ADOT of rushing things. In fact, the biggest criticism about this particular stretch of road is that it's taken so long that developers built houses in the path. Drive out there today, and you'll hear hammering and see construction going up in the proposed footprint of the freeway.

Yet our councilman just keeps repeating his "win-win" mantra, hoping that an agreement can be reached with the Gila River Indian Community to put the freeway on the reservation.

That's not likely. The tribe has a resolution on the books forbidding even an environmental study.

Such an attitude by our councilman only serves to enable the stance of some who think if we drag out the process long enough, either the tribe will change its stance or the freeway project will die. Neither of those is a realistic option.

Stanton may be betting his political popularity on standing against the freeway, but the other way to read his actions is that he's just hiding from what is edging closer to reality.

Every traffic study for the past 20 years has pointed to the need for the freeway. ADOT had its chance to put it on the reservation years ago and didn't take that opportunity. It no longer exists, but the need for a freeway still does.

Good leadership means finding a way to mitigate the ill effects rather than continuing to pretend there's another choice.

The Village Planning Committee may just be hedging bets by getting involved in design concepts. If some "miracle" occurs and the freeway moves south, that's wonderful. But if it stays along Pecos, it would benefit the residents to look out for

community interests now.

By next spring, ADOT will be issuing a draft Environmental Impact Study. Design concepts are part of that study. There will be opportunity for input between the draft and final version - expected by the end of next year - but still, sooner is better than later.

When ADOT builds a freeway, the standard model comes with rubberized asphalt on grade-level lanes, landscaping and one-color walls with decorative designs. Fancier artwork would be a cost Phoenix would need to pay.

South Mountain's watershed runs southeast, so there will be freeway retention basins. Such basins are a great opportunity for ballfields and dog parks, but those costs must be paid by the city. A trail system along the freeway is also something that needs to be planned early and funded by Phoenix.

In addition to having more input in the design, it behooves Ahwatukee residents to start lobbying their city now for funding for the niceties that go alongside a freeway.

There is still a possibility that the freeway will not be built along Pecos Road. But if it is going to be built there, the community will be better off by having some input.

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